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Warwick, Tosh ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9112-4612>
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Challenging the ‘decline’ of the industrial elite in the manufacturing town: Middlesbrough’s steel magnates and the urban sphere 1880–1931

TOSH WARWICK

Introduction

The last quarter of the nineteenth century has been characterised as a period heralding a decline in participation by British urban elites in the day-to-day activities of the towns and cities that housed their businesses. It is often argued that these businessmen withdrew from leadership in the urban sphere and adopted a more leisurely, country-focused, gentrified lifestyle.¹ Recent work has challenged the extent of elite withdrawal from towns and cities and this paper suggests that it is useful to consider the period as one of *reconfiguration* of industrialist engagement with the Victorian ‘boom town’ rather than one characterised by decline. Taking the North Eastern England industrial town of Middlesbrough as a case study, this article highlights evidence of continued industrial elite involvement in the traditional areas of influence such as municipal and economic life, as well as placing heightened emphasis on their exercise of authority through leadership of voluntary bodies and patronage of company-driven initiatives. It is argued that through this evolution of industrialist urban engagement, Middlesbrough’s steel magnates continued to play a crucial role in the fabric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ‘Ironopolis’ alongside the petite bourgeoisie and working-classes that have often been portrayed as displacing the industrial elite. In 1862, on a visit to the town, the future Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone hailed it as a ‘remarkable place, the youngest child of England’s enterprise ... an infant Hercules’.² In only a century it expanded from a tiny hamlet of just 25 inhabitants in 1801 to a town of 90,000 in 1901, and it had almost 140,000 people thirty years later.³ Central to its growth was the iron industry, which dictated its economic, political and social development in the early decades: ironmasters sat on the town council, provided the first MP and gifted the first public park and early urban institutions.

Urban elites and urban governance

In his seminal work, *Victorian Cities*, Asa Briggs declared the influence of Middlesbrough’s late nineteenth century industrialists to have shifted from a mid-century strong point to one significantly reduced at the end of the Victorian era. For Briggs, the end of the period heralded ‘signs that the will to control of the ironmasters was being blunted as they followed the pattern of other English businessmen and chose to live in the country rather than in the town’.⁴ Moreover, he argued that the offspring of this early generation of industrialists, together with the managers who had come to play an increasing role in the day-to-day running of production previously overseen by the owners, lacked ‘the feelings of the older generation about the links which bound them to the town’.⁵ There are similarly negative portrayals of

disengaged Middlesbrough manufacturers in other research on the town, including accusations that elites were unwilling to commit their wealth to urban initiatives for the wider public good owing to an 'exaggerated respect for the laws of economics'.⁶ This perceived 'withdrawal' of Middlesbrough's late nineteenth century iron and steel leaders from the urban sphere reflects wider traditional narratives in urban history of a declining industrial spirit. Garrard, Gunn, Rubinstein and Wiener have all pointed to a decreased practical and visible participation of the industrial elite in the towns and cities of their businesses.⁷ Rubinstein has explained this with shifts in elite ideologies from an apparent concern for the locality and industry, to an increasingly national orientation at the expense of local engagement. This process saw second and third generation industrialist families incorporated into a 'national elite' as an alternative to local interests, a process reinforced during the interwar period through shared educational and cultural interaction.⁸ Moreover, traditional assessments have argued that men of wealth lost their grip on the symbolic and visual register of civic life due to increasing challenges from below, as the petite bourgeoisie, trade unions and labour organisations sought representation in council chambers, developed their own institutions and established interest groups.

These traditional perspectives have been challenged by emphasis in more recent decades on the wider spheres of 'urban governance' rather than the narrower focus of 'urban government', thereby challenging the extent of elite 'withdrawal' from the urban sphere and questioning the suitability of 'decline' narratives. As Roth and Beachy argue in their study of power relations in cities, it is necessary to 'combine several fields of research, which have otherwise often remained separate: the economic, social and cultural history of elite groups, on the one hand, and the political history of power resources and decision-making on the other'.⁹ Within this broader framework of 'urban governance', narratives of altered and evolving elite civic and business ties have superseded those centred upon decline and departure, arguing urban elite cultural, political and participation reflected 'the greater diversity of the local economy', an evolution that meant large businessmen operated alongside and shared power with the emergent petite bourgeoisie and labour representatives.¹⁰

In adopting a wider approach to understanding the power relations and cultural exchanges at play in the late nineteenth and early twentieth city, institutions and activities traditionally overlooked in favour of formal economic and political institutions have received greater attention. For instance, social and leisure interactions of major employers, philanthropic initiatives, participation in voluntary organisations and holding office in business associations have all come to the fore.¹¹ This article looks to these organisations to contend that, while the involvement of Middlesbrough's steel magnates in some spheres of urban life undoubtedly reduced in the decades leading up to the First World War, the extent of this decreased involvement has been exaggerated. Steel magnates continued to play an active role through business, social and cultural organisations, ranging from those established during the town's growth in the mid-nineteenth century, to new developments including a museum, library and a Winter Garden.

The Victorian Ironopolis

At the heart of Middlesbrough's mushroom growth was the boom in the town's iron industry following the discovery of major local ore deposits in 1850.¹² For over a century, iron and steel manufacturing dictated not only the economic story of the area, but also the political, demographic, social and cultural make-up of the town.

Following in the footsteps of the founder of the Middlesbrough iron industry—Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan—many notable industrialist families established works in this burgeoning urban milieu during the 1850s, including Sir Bernhard Samuelson, the celebrated Victorian ironmaster and Liberal MP Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, and Alexander Brodie Cochrane. In 1875, Arthur John Dorman and Albert de Lande Long joined in partnership to establish Dorman Long, the firm which became one of the major steel manufacturers and established a worldwide reputation for its bridge building capabilities, responsible for landmarks such as Sydney Harbour Bridge and Newcastle's Tyne Bridge.¹³

The exploitation of the raw materials saw economic migrants flocking to the town to find employment in the ironworks. With its concentration on heavy manufacturing Middlesbrough attracted a high percentage of single, working-class male immigrants who brought with them a 'male-dominated culture, founded on the shared experience of sole breadwinners engaged in demanding, even dangerous, labour'.¹⁴ The rapid expansion of the urban area beyond the original grid plan, with about 5000 inhabitants, lead contemporaries to draw comparisons with the fast-developing frontiers of Australia and the American West. New communities came into being with a rough but vigorous life of their own, closely defined by their relationship with the manufacturing industries. Middlesbrough was, in a sense, the British Ballarat. Certainly, despite the inferior popular appeal of iron to gold, the statistics were regarded as breathtaking by prominent writers on the British economy.¹⁵ Although David Taylor has challenged the suitability of comparisons to Ballarat, the key point remains that the centrality of industry and industrialists in the very birth of the town makes it a useful case study for understanding their relationship with the urban sphere.¹⁶ The traditional arena for gauging this relationship has been the 'dominant bodies in local politics'—in this case the borough council—as well as parliamentary representation. While there is much validity in studying the extent of the steel magnates' participation at parliamentary level, the borough council, central to the day-to-day life of the town, is the focus here.¹⁷

The evolution of local government

Middlesbrough was incorporated as a borough in 1853, and the first council reflected the central place of the iron industry in the area with ironmasters represented at every level. Henry Bolckow was the first mayor; his business partner John Vaughan and another ironmaster Isaac Wilson were aldermen, and another ironmaster served as a councillor. By 1872 there were no fewer than ten ironmasters on the council, making them the occupational group with the highest representation in the council chamber.¹⁸ However, in the following decades the composition of the council changed to reflect both the expansion of Middlesbrough's commercial, retail and industrial interests and the increased democratisation of the period. As a result, the burgeoning workers' organisations and the 'shopocracy' sought political representation. Doyle points to there being just one ironmaster serving as a councillor in 1912 as emblematic of wider national trends which witnessed a 'declining dominance of substantial manufacturers and merchants' as borough councillors.¹⁹ This reduction in the number of iron and steel proprietors as councillors can be explained by a number of factors. Elections were increasingly contested towards the close of the century and Charles Lowthian Bell's standing for re-election in 1891 provides an insight into the challenges faced. Despite his role as a director at Bell Brothers' ironworks, one of the major employers in the town, his position as councillor for the South Ward faced significant threat. Having received the most votes when initially elected to the

council, and having been returned unopposed three years later in 1888, in 1891 Bell finished second to the wharf-owner Thomas Roddam Dent, and was re-elected ahead of the next candidate by just 12 votes.²⁰ But this was the closest an iron and steel manufacturer came to failing to secure re-election during the period, so the reduction in their representation as councillors cannot be explained by the polls. Instead, contemporaries attributed the declining numbers to the fact that leading manufacturers shunned municipal office, a point reflected in the press coverage of the Bell's election as mayor of Middlesbrough a year later.²¹ The *North Eastern Daily Gazette's* article 'Our Northern Mayors' heralded Bell as being among those mayors disproving the 'allegation so far as the North-East of England is concerned [that] public, and more especially municipal, service is falling into disrepute – that men of character and talent are showing an increasing desire to shirk its acceptance and performance'.²² Three years later the same publication recorded his continued commitment to the Board of Guardians, praising his regular attendance at Middlesbrough Union meetings.²³

Despite the praise lavished on Bell and other manufacturers who continued to serve as councillors into the 1890s, there was clearly a perception of their reduced municipal participation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new families were represented on the expanding council. In particular the Careys and Coates from the Independent Labour Party began to play an important role:²⁴ in 1919 Alice Schofield Coates became the first woman councillor, in 1923 being joined by her sister-in-law Marion Coates Hansen.²⁵ People in occupations such as shopkeepers, professionals, blastfurnacemen, innkeepers, and prominent figures in workers' associations were elected to the council.²⁶ Yet, at the upper levels of municipal government—the mayoralty and the aldermanic bench—the magnates continued to exercise power. Aldermen, those 'next in dignity after the mayor', were chosen by fellow-councillors, several heads of industry being deemed worthy of elevation.²⁷ Edward Williams, manager at Bolckow Vaughan, was a councillor from 1868, mayor in 1873-4, and then alderman, an office he held until his death in 1886. J.F Wilson enjoyed almost three decades as alderman (1891-1919), while Sir Hugh Bell followed up seven years as a councillor with thirty years' service as alderman (1877-1907) to add to three terms as mayor (1874, 1883, 1911).²⁸ Other representatives of the industrialist interests also enjoyed election to the mayoralty, including Charles Dorman, son of Dorman Long's co-founder. Beyond formal election, municipal honours were also afforded to steel magnates in a move that can be interpreted as recognition of service and an eagerness to ensure their continued attachment to the council, as when Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell and Hugh Bell received the Freedom of the Borough.²⁹

Business associations and economic engagement

As with the borough council, the composition of the town's early economic organisations and business associations reflected the dominance of the iron industry.³⁰ While the day-to-day running of iron and steel plant was delegated to professional managers, major iron and steel firms continued to be members of the business organisations such as the Middlesbrough Chamber of Commerce, on which they were represented by individual steel magnates and junior family members.³¹ The Chamber of Commerce played a crucial role in a wide range of business activities central to the town's economic success, such as agreeing prices, collating and sharing information, and investigating new technology. Its importance was not lost on Walter Johnson, director of Bell Brothers iron and steel works and president of the

Chamber for twenty years: in his 1912 final presidential address, he argued that 'representations came better from a Chamber of Commerce than from a Town Council which had other functions to perform ... If there was a consensus of opinion upon any particular matter from the Chambers of Commerce the Government was not long in giving attention to that matter. Many things which had been advocated by the Chambers of Commerce had become law'.³²

Steel interests continued to be strongly represented after the First World War. Walter Storr, commercial manager and director at Bolckow Vaughan, was elected to the presidency in 1913,³³ and his successor was the ironmaster J.J. Burton of the Tees Furnace Company, elected in 1918.³⁴ Similarly, the Cleveland Ironmasters' Association, which from its early days had been presided over by leading ironmasters such as Henry Bolckow, Isaac Wilson, Bernhard Samuelson, Edward Williams and Isaac Lowthian Bell, continued to benefit from the active involvement of members of those dynasties. Carl Bolckow, John F. Wilson, Francis Samuelson, Penry Williams, Illyd Hedley, Hugh Bell and Arthur Dorman were second and third generation members of the industrial families who served as president in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁵ Other local employers' organisations, such as the Durham Coal Owners' Association and the Cleveland Mine Owners' Association, listed several steelmasters in their ranks into the 1920s as chairmen and committee members.³⁶

Associational and cultural pursuits

In addition to the formal political and economic bodies discussed above, associational and cultural institutions were important conduits for the involvement of industrialists in the urban sphere in Middlesbrough and more widely in the towns and cities of Britain. These included bodies concerned with leisure pursuits, philosophical reflection and socialising, forming part of a 'clubland' cultural environment linked to elite politics and business activities.³⁷ The Cleveland Club, Middlesbrough's main gentleman's club, was established in 1869 and, housed in the Royal Exchange Buildings until 1936, expanded from an initial membership of around sixty (focused on the ironmasters) to some '400 members who were mainly manufacturers, merchants and professionals', many of them living on the town's outskirts or further afield.³⁸ Throughout the period of this study, this exclusive club, joining which was dependent on nomination by two members, committee approval and payment of an entrance fee, acted as a social hub for generations of manufacturing families such as the Bolckows, Bells and Dormans and Samuelsons. Although its demographic changed to reflect the wider economic basis of the town, the iron and steel manufacturers continued to engage with the Club, situated in the heart of the town's financial district.³⁹ As well as providing a library, bar, billiards room and organising cricket matches against other clubs, the Cleveland Club held fundraisers, banquets, testimonials and balls for members.⁴⁰ Extensive press coverage of events such as the annual ball, including lists of attendees, ensured that the steel magnates were visible in this 'distinct sphere [in] a particular social space in the city'.⁴¹

Thus, consciously or not, those steel manufacturers who had left the borough council or handed over the day-to-day management of their works to a general manager remained very much part of the psychological landscape of the town. The same is true of another institution typically of towns and cities throughout the nation—the Literary and Philosophical Society. Although the prestige of the 'Lit & Phil' tended to weaken elsewhere from the 1870s onwards,⁴² the Cleveland Literary and Philosophical Society sustained the financial and participatory support of the steel magnates well into the twentieth century. The familiar figures of Samuelson, Williams

and Lowthian Bell served as presidents up to the 1880s and contributed financially to the construction of premises for the society. Later generations of steel magnates continued this involvement and helped the club reach the largest membership in its history by 1919.⁴³ The Bell family made a particularly notable contribution: Sir Hugh served on the council and presented papers on his journeys to Khartoum, Bombay and Basrah; his daughter Gertrude Bell gave papers on her travel experiences; and in 1919 Sir Hugh and his son Colonel Maurice Lowthian Bell subscribed alongside Francis Samuelson, Iltyd Williams, J.J. Burton and Walter L. Johnson to the Society's £3000 scheme for renovation.⁴⁴

Philanthropic networks

Philanthropic patronage of urban initiatives was arguably the chief way in which the steel magnates' reinvented their relationship with the urban sphere in early twentieth century Middlesbrough. The industrialist families, including wives and daughters, supported appeals for annual subscriptions and donations to schools, relief funds and hospitals and, significantly, established their own schemes and institutions that sought to improve the lives of citizens. Hospital provision, despite frequent strain between industrialists, practitioners and management, saw considerable input by the steel magnates. The Samuelson family financed the construction of the Sir Bernhard Samuelson Wing of the North Riding Infirmary in 1907,⁴⁵ while the North Ormesby Hospital was the beneficiary of a new wing funded by the Cochrane family.⁴⁶ Several members of the Bell, Bolckow, Cochrane, Dorman, Samuelson, Vaughan and Wilson dynasties served on the North Ormesby Hospital Council and the North Riding Infirmary Committee.⁴⁷ Other organisations such as the Guild of Help, established in 1909 in an attempt to address the impact of poverty in the town, benefitted from financial, practical and honorific support from the steel magnates.⁴⁸ The well-being of young people was also an important area of involvement, including the Middlesbrough Juvenile Organisations Committee which was set up 'to co-ordinate ... existing efforts affecting the lives of the young people of Middlesbrough', with leading iron and steel families subscribing, charring, and hosting events at their homes on the outskirts of the town.⁴⁹

The steel magnates also made a philanthropic physical contribution to Middlesbrough during the Edwardian period with the construction of the Dorman Memorial Museum (1904), Middlesbrough Winter Garden (1907) and the Middlesbrough Carnegie Public Library (1912). Sir Arthur Dorman donated the museum to the town in memory of his son George Lockwood Dorman and the other officers of the Yorkshire regiment who lost their lives during the South African Wars, and the museum continues to serve the town today.⁵⁰ Three years later Lady Florence Bell established the Middlesbrough Winter Garden, a town centre venue that provided teetotal leisure facilities to the iron and steel workers and their families, often attracting over a thousand visitors per day. The initiative was funded chiefly by Lady Bell's husband Sir Hugh, who paid for the building and left a £5000 bequest to the Garden in his will.⁵¹ Lady Bell's involvement echoed her wider concerns for the well-being of the ironworkers, evidenced in her celebrated social survey *At the Works*, which explored the everyday life of the town's working classes.⁵² Middlesbrough's new library opened in 1912, funded chiefly by Andrew Carnegie but with contributions of land and money from the major iron and steel firms and individuals including Sir Hugh Bell.⁵³ Such involvement ensured that the industrialists remained on the symbolic and visual register in twentieth century Middlesbrough, with a continuing sense of the realities of life for the town's working class inhabitants.

Conclusion

Despite the undoubted change in the role played by steel magnates in the political, civic, associational and philanthropic life of Middlesbrough in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is clear that the withdrawal of the industrialist elite from the urban sphere has been overemphasised. In the realm of municipal government, the initial dominance of iron and steel manufacturers as elected councillors was steadily reduced, but by holding aldermanic and mayoral office the leaders of industry continued to play a wider role in the politics of the town. Bodies such as employers' organisations and the Chamber of Commerce retained strong representation from steel magnates into the interwar years, as did the gentlemen's clubs and the Lit & Phil in the commercial centre. The early decades of the twentieth century also witnessed a second phase of interaction, through the philanthropic zeal of the industrial families. This benefited many of the existing voluntary organisations and urban institutions, while the establishment of the Winter Garden and the Dorman Museum ensured that these families remained central to the physical and psychological framework of the town. Even after the deaths of Sir Hugh Bell and Sir Arthur Dorman in 1931, which led to changes in Dorman Long's management structure and a reduction in company philanthropy, the bricks and mortar of institutions bearing their names meant that Middlesbrough was still very much a town indebted to its steel magnates.⁵⁴

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TOSH WARWICK joined Manchester Metropolitan University in January 2019 as Research Associate (Impact) in the History Research Centre. He was previously Research Associate in Urban Studies at the University of Glasgow, lectured at Huddersfield, Leeds Beckett and Teesside Universities, and held a number of roles in the heritage sector, including Heritage Development Officer at Middlesbrough Council where he contributed to major HLF supported regeneration projects. He has research interests in urban history and heritage, including urban elites and governance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has published on the role of industrialists in shaping the business, culture and politics of manufacturing towns. Recent research has explored the experience of northern industrial centres during the FIFA World Cup in 1966, including the interactions between Middlesbrough and North Korea resulting from the latter's matches in the town during the tournament.